

## Article

# Feminist approaches to teaching about VAW: Facilitating empowerment through a critique of dominant knowledges

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**Feminist Approaches to Teaching about VAW:  
Facilitating Empowerment Through a Critique of Dominant  
Knowledges.**

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**Introduction:**

This article is based on the rationale behind my decision to do a Professional Doctorate in Education (Ed.Doc). The paper does not focus primarily on the study, which is still in its infancy. Rather it sets out my journey towards this point through an exploration of my own teaching position and the link between my research and practice. It maps out my journey as a woman and a survivor who teaches about violence against women (VAW) in a university setting and attempts to draw together the various political, theoretical and methodological approaches that inform both my teaching practice and the related study I intend to do. I begin with an autobiographical account of my experiences teaching on a module that explores VAW and then offer an overview of the literature, theories and methodologies that inform my teaching practice. By mapping out my own journey, I do not offer a method of how to teach VAW from a feminist perspective as such, but instead explore the complexities, and sometimes contradictions, of bringing the self into the classroom. This is particularly important when the subject being taught relates directly to the real lives of both students and teachers. The paper highlights a need for the empirical work that I intend to do, involving interviews with students and offers an account my own experiences and understandings as a woman, survivor and teacher so theses can be explored further and in connection with the experiences and understandings of women students who have experienced violence. The works of Paulo Freire and bell hooks offer a framework for my teaching practice, whilst the works of Michel Foucault and Adrian Howe are useful tools for building a critique of power and knowledge in relation to VAW and creating meaningful spaces where VAW can be explored and challenged by those who are directly affected by such violence.

The Ed.Doc is a post-graduate taught course which incorporates monthly classes with assessments and a larger research project that has an explicit focus on my teaching practice. The study I am doing involves interviews and focus groups with women students that I have taught on a module on Violence Against Women (VAW). The questions will centre around the women's journey into HE; their experiences of the module I taught and; their own experiences and understandings of VAW and gender oppression. A deeply reflexive approach will be required because my research is intentionally partial. It is built upon a judgement about behaviour and a recognition of the harms caused by that behaviour. I proceed from a solid assertion that VAW is wrong. Using Foucault's words, I am *reacting to that which is intolerable*. It would be pointless to try and claim that I will try to be as objective as possible and that I will not approach the research with any pre-existing assumptions. It would also be a blatant lie. Declaring my starting position (and one which I feel pretty certain will not change in the near future) does not make my research invalid, it gives it purpose. But it is not enough to simply state my position. Acknowledging our subject positions makes research much harder as it requires a constant interrogation of our motivations, a continual reflection and vigorous self-critique. Declaring that I am a woman who has experienced multiple forms of violence including child sexual assault, rape and serious physical assault does not automatically qualify me to speak about or for all victims and survivors of VAW but it does offer a transparency. It provides the context for my research project. However, it would be far too simplistic to assume that it is my experiences of violence that have prompted me to do this particular research. Personal experience alone is not enough. It is important to engage with such experience and interrogate the self in relation to others. My experience of teaching about VAW and having other women disclose their own experiences have been motivation. It is my engagement with students that has prompted to ask questions about VAW in relation to higher Education. It would be difficult to claim that my research, and motivation for doing it, are not shaped by profound emotions: anger, fear, pain, sorrow, hope, a sense of solidarity and

sisterhood. I want to explore the impact of these emotions on teaching and learning about VAW and the part they play in challenging violence and oppression.

### **Staring Points: Locating the Self**

I came to HE myself as a single mother and a survivor of multiple forms of violence. My choice of degree was not determined by any particular interest in the subject. The degree was running for the first time. High A-level grades were not needed and it was close enough to where I was living at the time, with a one-year-old son, for me to commute. For the first two years of my degree I worked as hard as I could with no real passion for the subject. I had bought into the neoliberal claim that you can get anywhere you want in life if you just work hard. I was driven by the need to get a good degree in order to get a good job and make a better life for my son and I. It was a soul destroying experience, listening to 'experts' and reading journal articles that explained people like me in a way that was alien and felt wrong. I found myself thinking that I was wrong and that I had to make myself better. I felt a need to distance myself from who I was in order to become one of these dispassionate experts.

In my third year, a new module, called 'Sex, Violence and Crime' was introduced, and it was going to be taught by a Professor from Australia. We were told that this Professor was a feminist. I was excited. The module had a huge impact on my life – going far beyond the grades that I achieved. It was a very difficult module but it was also liberating and exhilarating. After feeling lost and wandering, suddenly I found a lecturer and a whole series of readings that seemed to speak directly to me. The lecturer did not keep herself distant from her students. She was interested in us and our lives and so she made the direct link between the theory and our real lived experiences explicit. I was no longer being taught in a dispassionate and abstract way, or feeling like that I had no right to be in the classroom because the 'objects' of discussion – the underclass, the single mum, the delinquent – were actually me. I was now able to bring myself into my studies as a whole person and not continually engage in the traumatic practice of trying to look at myself in an objective and dispassionate way. The module, which I inherited many years later, and more importantly, the lecturer who taught it, helped me to decide that I wanted to be a teacher. My whole life outlook had changed quite dramatically. I longer wanted a series of qualifications, or a career, just to prove to the world that I was a good enough person. I wanted to be able to do for other students what that amazing feminist lecturer had done for me.

Even now, after teaching for 12 years I still feel like an intruder and that I do not belong. Students often tell me affectionately that they understand things when I explain it because I am 'common, like them'. I cannot honestly say that this was a conscious decision. Although it fits well with my politics, I do not remember ever thinking to myself that I was going to intentionally speak to students in language that they would understand. Despite the claims by students that my use of language is a good thing, for a long time I saw it as a personal failure, proof that I do not fit and do not belong. Indeed, I still have those moments when I ask myself, *am I really a fraud?* My speech in the classroom is substantially different to my speech in the meeting room or at a conference. When I am with colleagues I stutter, trip over my words, lose my train of thought. I am terrified that I will be exposed as someone who has no right to occupy that space. In the classroom I am confident, I thrive on the interaction with students – we are equal and we share experience and knowledge. I am not sure if this dynamic would be the same if my student demographic was different. I teach in a post-92 University in the North of England. Many of my students consider themselves working class, most of them either live in town or commute from nearby towns. I perceive

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2  
3 them as similar to me. There are a good number of mature women students with children and other  
4 dependents.  
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6 It would be irresponsible of me to claim that in the classroom my students and I are equal without further  
7 explanation. I enter the classroom seeing my students as my equal, that is not to say that they see me in  
8 the same way, nor is it to say that such equality exists in reality. My current employment and financial  
9 security is significantly different to that of the majority of my students and we enter the classroom for  
10 very different reasons. I am still the teacher who stands at the front of the class. Even when I physically  
11 move myself from this position of authority and sit next to my students, they very often position  
12 themselves so that I remain the focal point of the discussion. I need to remind students in discussions that  
13 they do not have to speak directly to me but I cannot ignore the responsibility that I have as a teacher.  
14 They look to me for guidance and support, to teach them.  
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18 My teaching practice is shaped by a commitment to feminist aims of challenging women’s oppression and  
19 shaped by my own personal experiences – experiences of violence myself, and of teaching about VAW as  
20 part of an undergraduate degree course. I am guided by strong feminist principles including:  
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22 ...a focus on inequality; a rejection of the traditional distinction between the researcher and the  
23 researched; enabling the voices of women or other marginalised groups to be heard; placing  
24 importance on politically active and emancipatory research; reflexivity; concern over the  
25 emotional and physical well-being of both the researcher and the researched; and the selection  
26 of tools used in the research (Skinner, Hester and Malos, 2005: 10).  
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29 The principles of feminist research are not only applicable to my research and teaching practice, they  
30 inform my trade union activism and every aspect of my life. The personal and political merge always and  
31 so it is vital that I examine the ways in which my real-lived experiences impact upon both my teaching and  
32 my research. A continuous reflexivity is required. Sarah Tracy (2010) argues that one of the most  
33 celebrated practices of qualitative research is self-reflexivity. She uses the word ‘sincerity’:  
34

35 ...to relate to notions of authenticity and genuineness... Sincerity means that the research is  
36 marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals and foibles as well as  
37 about how these played a role in the methods, joys and mistakes of the research (Tracy, 2010:  
38 841).  
39  
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41 This sincerity is something I hope to achieve in both my teaching practice and my conscious struggle  
42 against violence and oppression. Reflexive practices go far beyond the realm of research and find space  
43 in the everyday lives of feminists. In order to achieve sincerity, it is important to address the ethical  
44 question of ‘speaking for others’. Linda Alcoff (1991) offers an in-depth analysis of speaking positions and  
45 the dangers of speaking for or about others. Her works explores the ways in which speaking about or for  
46 others involves representing them in a certain way. As my research involves work with students, and my  
47 teaching involves a dialogue with and about women who have experienced violence, this attention to  
48 ‘speaking for’ and representation’ is important. This is not to say that one should never speak for or about  
49 others but that there needs to be a recognition of power and privilege. As Alcoff herself asks: ‘If I don’t  
50 speak out for those less privileged than myself am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out  
51 against oppression?’ (1991: 8).  
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As I noted earlier, my decision to do the Ed.doc was based on observations that I have made, and experiences I have had, whilst teaching over the past twelve years. In the criminology modules that I teach, issues surrounding gender inequality and violence against women repeatedly arise. I have found that whilst teaching on modules that address the very emotionally and politically loaded topic of VAW, women students often disclose their own experiences of such violence. Throughout my teaching career, I have found that each year no fewer than five or six women have approached me after lectures or seminars where VAW has been the subject and disclosed their own experiences of violence. Just recently, I have started to deliver the module mentioned in the introduction that is devoted entirely to violence against women and the number of women who approach me has more than trebled. On the one hand, I am continually horrified (though not surprised) by the stories these women tell and on the other I am optimistic by their willingness and ability to speak out about something that is frequently trivialised, justified, silenced and ignored.

In many cases the women that approach me inform me that the teaching sessions have been an eye opener, sometimes providing them with the tools to articulate and understand what had happened to them. Perhaps, most importantly, they say that what they have learned helps them to challenge traditional narratives that have left them feeling alone, ashamed and unimportant. This prompted me to think of the ways in which I, as a feminist committed to the fight to end violence against women, could explore this further. My main concern is that traditional approaches to the study of violence often teach the subject material in a detached and apparently 'impartial' way that fails to recognise the wealth of knowledge and understanding that students may bring to the classroom. 'Expert' truths that excuse such violence, blame victims, and seek explanations in the individual, are very often at odds with the real lived experiences of students and form a significant barrier to understanding and articulation at both an individual and collective level. Within most (if not all) social sciences, the topics explored in the classroom are not abstract or distanced from the real lives of students (in the same way they may be in disciplines such as maths or engineering) and students often start degrees such as criminology with direct lived experiences of the various phenomena we explore: racism; sexism; class oppression; victimisation; criminalisation. Many have had some interaction with various criminal justice agencies whether that be as a witness, victim or suspect/offender. They do not come to the degree with no prior knowledge. This is not to say that personal experience is a pre-requisite for understanding, or that it should be hailed as the most important source of knowledge. Indeed, theories that focus solely on personal experience do run the risk of becoming purely individualistic, de-politicised and of very little use in collective struggles against oppression. But still, personal experience does have a crucial role to play. For feminists this has been key in challenging dominant forms of 'knowing' that have retained power and prominence because of claims of the superiority of objectivity, neutrality and impartiality (despite them being difficult, if not impossible, to achieve). The alternative 'knowledge' offered by feminists within criminology (Heidensohn, 1968; Gelsthorpe, 1990; Smart, 1992; Howe, 2002) and a whole range of other disciplines (Dworkin, 1974; Harding, 1987; Weedon, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Connell, 2002; Phoenix, 2001) have exposed the subject position of male experts in a world that was seen through a patriarchal lens.

At the start of the module that I currently teach on, students are told what the module is about. They are informed that it does not involve any graphic descriptions of VAW. I locate myself as a survivor of violence and give them a very brief account of my experiences. Students have said that this is something that they particularly like because of the way I do it. One student said, "You just say it but do not expect any sympathy or further discussion, you just say this is what happened to me, explain how and why it fits in



with the module and then move on". My intention at this stage is to humanise the theory and the literature.

The module is split into lectures and seminars. In the lectures, I allow space for discussion after every couple of slides. Whilst students are told that they do not have to, and should never feel pressured to do so, they are invited to speak about their own experiences if they wish to. So far, many students have done so, or, where they have not felt comfortable speaking in the class, they have approached me afterwards and said that they have experienced something and that they could really relate to the discussions. This prompted me to set up a VAW reading group for undergraduate students where a short reading was set and once a month we would meet up to discuss. The discussions in this group were more open and whilst I had set it up specifically for students on my module, these students then asked if they could invite friends from other courses who had also experienced violence. Gradually, the women took ownership of the group. Whilst I still booked the rooms and attended each session, the women took the lead between them and, as well as discussing their own personal experiences, beliefs and understandings, started to consider ways in which they could do something meaningful. Last year we organised a fundraising event on international day for the elimination for VAW.

The module attracts far more women than men and it may have been this dynamic that made women feel more comfortable speaking out and enabled them to find solidarity with each other. Last year, because of timetabling issues, we had a seminar before the lecture and so I said to students, "Right, this is a module about interpersonal violence, what do you think it's going to be about and what are you hoping it is about?" To my surprise, the women spoke with energy and enthusiasm, bouncing off each other and engaging in a very lively and meaningful discussion. It was like they had so much inside them waiting to come out and this classroom was the space where they could speak, on their own terms. There were three young men in this class and they were silent throughout the first part. During the break two of these men approached me and said that they were leaving the module because it wasn't what they had signed up for. I asked them if they had read the module handbook and they said no. Some of the women in the class had heard this exchange and were quite angry. The discussion in the second part of the session centred upon these two men. The young man who had stayed joined in and there was a general sense of the two who left were not willing to listen to the voices and stories of women. I had taught all of the students in this class in the first year and my approach had always been one of start with a general informal discussion about the topic and then weave in the theory. One particularly angry student pointed out that what the two men meant when they said they 'hadn't signed up for this' was, 'they hadn't signed up to acknowledge their own privilege'. It is important to note that a number of men do take this module and do get something from the experience but as this paper is focussing specifically on the experiences of women I do not cover them here. There does appear to be different experiences for men and women on the module and so this would be worthy of further study at a future date.

The seminars for this module are extremely informal and whilst readings were set each week, and students were encouraged to do these, they were also told that if, for whatever reason, they could not do it beforehand, they could still come to the class. We would begin with a general discussion and then I would see if they could make links to that and the reading, in many cases they could, and if not, I would point out sections and relate the two, there were many times when we veered off topic but the broader discussions were still relevant to the other all issues. Often, I would say 'Wow, we have gone way off track' but the students themselves would say, 'Well no, not really' and then explain how they understood the links. This approach to seminars is something that I have done since I began teaching and it has always

seemed to work. The discussions are not completely unstructured but, rather than focus on set seminar questions, I prompt students to talk about what they want to talk about. The lectures and the reading lists provide students with the relevant information for their assignments and learning outcomes and the seminar should be a space for students to actively engage in their own learning journey. I don't think this active engagement can take place with an authoritarian lecturer dictating the parameters of the discussions. Indeed, many students are quite shocked by my seminars initially, but gradually feel more and more comfortable. It has been a very long time since I have had to deal with a quiet seminar, or one where only or one students do all the speaking. There are students who never speak, I myself was one of those students who was terrified to speak in class and do not think it would be fair to put pressure on students to speak if they do not feel safe or comfortable doing so and tell this to each cohort of students that I teach. When students do not speak, I make an effort to catch them after the class and ask them directly if they are not speaking because they feel like they are not being given the chance or because they would rather not, they usually do not feel comfortable speaking but say that they find the discussions very interesting. Engagement and learning do not necessarily equate with speaking.

With the group of students that I had taught on the module for the first time, I had taught the vast majority of them previous year and some in the foundation year also, so a strong connection had already been built and their confidence to speak in the classroom was evident. For those I had not taught previously, they soon relaxed by taking their lead from others and joined in with discussions, saying that they really enjoyed the discussions. This year, I have a cohort that I have not taught as much previously and so my early questions of what do you want to talk about were initially met with silence. However, an explanation of my position and what I hope they get from the sessions, as well as a persistent questioning of what they think, with an affirmation that I believe that what they think is very important, saw a gradual opening up. This slight difference has given me something to think about for next year's cohort.

There are two assignments for the module. The first requires students to use Foucault to examine either the 'truth' of sex as it is presented in the media or the language of 'sex crime' within criminology texts. The second assignment is a reflective essay and students are invited to write about their own experiences if they would like to. Many do, and others do not make reference to specific experiences of violence but do write of a learning journey that is shaped by anger and a sense of injustice. The first time that I ran the module, the reading of the second assignments was particularly difficult for me. Despite being aware of the severity and extent of VAW, I was still floored by the stories of VAW that students provided: both by women who had experienced that violence first hand, and by young men who had witnessed their mothers or sisters being subjected to such violence. My reading of these assignments triggered quite complex emotions: on the one hand I was overwhelmed by the amount of violence that my students had been subjected to and despaired at the sheer scale of VAW. On the other hand, I was humbled by the strength and determination of these students. The divide between student and teacher was blurred completely and the words that students had used to describe me and my teaching practices - inspiring, empowering, motivating – became words that I could use to describe them and the impact that they had had upon me. Whilst I cannot deny that a power relationship exists (ultimately I am the one who grades the assignments that they have to do), the reflective essay that students write offers a dialogue that cannot be quantified with traditional marking schemes. It is the student's narrative, in their own words and only on what they wish to write about. When reading some of these assignments it is very easy to forget that they are undergraduate assignments because they offer as much as any feminist text that I have read.



The following sections will explore some of the literature on education and VAW in order to contextualise my own story above and to situate my teaching practice within a feminist theoretical framework.

**Women, Education and Violence**

There has been a steadily growing literature on VAW since the 1970s. Such works have considered: the scale of the problem (Kelly, 1988; Mullender, 1996; Walby, 2005); the impact of such violence Morley and Mulender, 1994; Itzin, 2006); the experiences of women survivors (Dobash and Dobash, 1985, Hague and Malos, 1998; Hanmer, 2000); critiques of traditional narratives that reinforce VAW (Cameron and Frazer, 1987; Gavey, 1989; Warkentin, 2010; Reverie and Byerly, 2013); and possible strategies for challenging VAW (Sen, Humphreys and Kelly, 2003; Hague and Mullender, 2005; Jarvinen et al, 2008; Moreno et al, 2015). However, as Wagner and Magnusson point out ‘...little analysis has been grounded specifically in the academic context’ (2005: 450). Arguing that the lack of attention to women’s experiences of trauma in the higher education is a ‘serious shortcoming’ (ibid.), their paper explores the impact of experiences of violence on women’s learning within higher education. They begin with a critique of the ‘individualised, de-contextualised and de-politicised healing’ of traditional narratives that place individual responsibility on women for their victimisation and healing arguing that:

The social construction of trauma as individual psychopathology obscures structures of oppression that perpetuate violence and offer only individualistic solutions to what are collective and political problems (Wagner and Magnusson, 2005: 452).

Like them, I am proposing a move away from the pathologising of individual survivors and towards an approach to VAW in higher education which ‘which acknowledges the overall domination of women, living in a patriarchal culture’. In Criminology degrees, the topic of Interpersonal Violence (and VAW more specifically) that is usually a part of the syllabus often directly relates to a number of women’s real lived experience and so teaching traditional, individualistic approaches to VAW, that ‘...blames women for their own victimisation, pressures them to return to ‘normal’ and then fit in again, minimising or denying the impact of the trauma’ (Wagner and Magnusson, 2005: 452) is problematic for women survivors in the classroom and for understandings of VAW more broadly. In such approaches, the desire to address the issue of VAW is tempered by the desire to avoid uncomfortable discussions about its real life existence. As Wagner and Magnusson state:

Despite the progress that has been realised theoretically, survivors continue to be impacted by dominant hegemonic discourses which demand that they keep their experiences of trauma outside of the public realm. Hence, women are pressured to separate their public-private self in order to maintain the equilibrium for those around them, who may be unsettled by the reality of violence (Wagner and Magnusson, 2005: 459).

Whilst they stress that the education system should not take the place of therapy, there is a clear recognition that ‘...as violence against women is a prevalent experience among women students, it should be accorded status as a legitimate consideration when developing pedagogical strategies’ (ibid.). A failure to acknowledge the reality and prevalence of violence in women’s lives further silences women. For Wagner and Magnusson that silence needs to be challenged with the development of new policies and practice to enhance women’s learning and they advocate ‘an approach which focuses on accommodating

the needs of trauma survivors, rather than expecting them to adapt to meet the expectations of the mainstream' (2005: 460).

The failure to address VAW meaningfully in Higher Education can be attributed in part to it being 'increasingly shaped by market-orientated values and approaches in the context of neoliberal globalisation' (Burke, 2015: 388). Penny Jane Burke explores the ways in which the common sense of neoliberalism impacts upon pedagogical practices within higher education, warning that 'unchecked individualism, increasingly embedded in hegemonic discourses of neoliberalism, which push us further from a sense of our human interdependence, connectivity and social belonging' (2015: 388). The narratives of neoliberalism, which focus on individuality, competition and marketisation saturate the traditional narratives of VAW that Wagner and Magnusson challenge. In this context higher education runs the risk of intensifying gender (amongst other forms of) oppression. For Burke:

Higher education is being reformed through globalisation and market-forces, but it remains a key institution that bears the pedagogical, social and moral responsibility to critique the assumptions generating hegemonic discourses that breed symbolic (and often material) violence, exclusion and misrecognition (2015: 389).

Burke's work focuses on the ways in which individualising discourses locate the problem of pedagogical participation in the individual participant (2015, 2017). She offers an analysis of the ways in which the individualising discourses and practices pose significant problems for non-traditional higher education students in a context where 'higher education pedagogy has become linked to private interests rather than the contributions to students' ability to negotiate the political, economic and social dimensions of human experience' (Burke, 2015: 389). She explains how:

Neoliberalism works in complex ways with other oppressive forces, such as patriarchy and institutionalised racism, to limit our conceptualisation of 'diversity' and difference and these dynamics reinforce our complicity in the politics of misrecognition, even when we strive towards social justice (Burke, 2015: 389).

In an attempt to facilitate empowerment among women students, both individually and collectively, there is a need to critically engage with difference in ways that do not result in what Burke refers to as 'misrecognition'. For her:

Misrecognition is a potent concept to help shed light on the subtle and insidious ways that different bodies and personhoods (or subjectivities) are positioned, constructed and mobilised across pedagogical spaces through practices of symbolic violence such as shaming. In such contexts, students marked out as different are continually at risk of being relocated as 'undeserving' and 'unworthy' of higher education participation (Burke, 2015: 394).

This understanding of misrecognition can offer more explanation to Wagner and Magnusson's analysis, noted earlier, of the ways in which women's 'private' experiences of violence are not given space in higher education spaces as they are not considered public concerns that justify public debate. Burke's work offers a space to situate this exclusion of women's experiences of violence within a critique of disciplinary technologies that students can find themselves subjected to when they 'fail'. She uses the example of participation in seminar debates and discussions which often require 'crafting an argument that is substantiated by 'evidence' and being 'rational' rather than 'anecdotal' (Burke, 2017: 432). Here, the

gendered hierarchy of narratives that has historically positioned women’s accounts of real-lived experiences (despite the deep level of analysis, reflexivity and critical engagement within much feminist work) as emotional, anecdotal and irrational. Here, Foucault’s explanation of subjugated knowledges as ‘a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: Naïve Knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault, 1980: 82) helps to understand the processes which marginalise and de-legitimise feminised ontological and epistemological positions within patriarchal institutions.

Burke also examines ‘shame’ as one of the consequences of misrecognition, and a barrier to full and engaged participation in higher education. Her analysis exposes the insidious ways in which terms such as ‘inclusion’ can work as a form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bordieu, 1984). The discourse of ‘inclusion’, Burke argues, ‘coerces those seen as excluded to conform to the conventions, expectations and values of hegemonic discourses and practices and to participate in a process of individual transformation into normalised personhood’ (2017: 433). For Burke, shame is deeply connected to the politics of marginalisation through both the fear of being shamed and the internalisation of shame (2015: 394). She points out that the experience of shame, which is ‘intimately connected to gendered, classed and racialised identities... is a social emotion that is internalised as a feeling of lack of self-worth or sense of failure’ (ibid). When we consider VAW within this context - whether it is women survivors accessing higher education in general, or encountering education about such violence – the experiences of shame and individual responsibility for ‘failure’ to participate in higher education, or deal ‘appropriately’ with their experiences of violence, can be intensified. Burke asserts:

...such experiences of shame and misrecognition are often reformed in neoliberal and meritocratic terms as about lack of confidence, compelling universities to adopt remedial support such as study skills to address policy agendas connected to widening participation and retention. This decontextualizes the embodied experiences of symbolic violence and marginalisation thus detaching the histories of gendered, classed and racialised pedagogies from expressions of lack of confidence (2015: 395).

The result, then is the reinforcement of hegemonic discourses that create hierarchies of knowledge and cast women (and their experiences of both violence and higher education) as unworthy and out of place. The structural inequalities and oppressions that higher education is best placed to address actually remain intact. To counter such problematic consequences of the marketisation and individualisation of higher education, Burke uses Zembylas’ (2010) critical framework in which ‘students and educators critically interrogate the interactions among power, emotion and praxis to enrich pedagogies in higher education’ (Zembylas, 2010 in Burke, 2017: 439). Such an approach, Burke explains, ‘require the development of compassionate space and orientations to critical dialogue, praxis and reflexivity, with participants taking seriously the unpredictable, unstable and generative nature of power (2017: 439). The feminist pedagogies proposed by writers such as Weiler (1994), Guest (2016) and McCusker (2017) help to develop such an approach to teaching that embodies the compassion, humanity and commitment to liberation that Freire envisioned in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and which guides supporters of transformative education.

In 1997, Sue Jackson described feminist theories of education as theories that:

...confront apparently fundamental categories such as 'scientific' or 'objective' or 'universal truth'. Most importantly, feminist theories also question the fundamental category 'knowledge', questioning who determines our understanding of what knowledge is and its links to power relations (Jackson, 1997: 459).

This response to, and critique of, 'knowledge' has done much to create that space for women and feminist analyses within academia. However, as the work mentioned previously has shown, in higher education there has been strong resistance and neoliberal ideologies are at odds with or stifle a critical feminist agenda. There are also dangers when power relations within the classroom are not recognised. Jackson argued that 'a critical pedagogy that calls for empowerment of students often fails to acknowledge this, with teachers imparting 'knowledge' supposedly neutral, impartial – to 'empower' their students' (1997: 459). A recognition of the power dynamics within the classroom, and a critical, self-reflexive approach on the part of teachers goes some way to address this problem. However, this is no easy task. Jackson reminds us that 'feminist theory has long questioned the extent to which it is possible for subordinated groups to issue challenges to language, when members of those groups are themselves constructed with their own sense of identity and self, in the language structures of the dominant group' (Jackson, 1997: 462). Later attempts to engage in a critical feminist pedagogy have still been grappling with these challenges.

Carly Guest, in her study on the significance of higher education to women's narrative of becoming feminist, found that amongst the women she interviewed educational spaces offered a 'fertile ground for engagement with feminist ideas' (2016: 472). She noted that, after starting college or university, the women 'reflect on and reinterpret a feminism that was knowable to them an inclination, instinct or feeling' (Guest, 2016: 474). This suggests that women 'know' something prior to their participation in higher education courses and their engagement with academic thought provides them with the language to articulate that, or, as Guest claims, offers them 'the tools to reflect upon their own understanding and experiences of feminism' (ibid.). The work carried out by Carly Guest and other feminist academics offers a more dynamic and engaging pedagogy than that usually offered by the model critiqued by Burke above. Geraldine McCusker (2017) also offers a description and explanation of her own experiences of attempting to adopt feminist teaching practices within higher education. She notes that, 'feminist pedagogy is not a monolithic and unitary' concept (McCusker, 2017: 2) but acknowledges that whilst 'feminist pedagogies are diverse and multifaceted in nature [they share] core goals of emancipation and liberation underpinning what is taught and how it is taught' (ibid.).

The dangers of a non-reflexive approach to feminism within academia, particularly in the context of neoliberalism are highlighted by Firth and Robinson, who argue that whilst feminist claims '...about women's experiences, perspectives and interests to ground the view that women as a group are opposed in systematic ways [...] are possible [...] making such claims from a vanguard position is inherently problematic (2016: 342). For them:

Feminist knowledge production today is largely the preserve of specialist academics and media figures, who define what counts as feminist knowledge. Women who are not specialist knowledge-producers become objects of knowledge who are spoken 'about' and 'for', rather than contributing to knowledge-production (Firth and Robinson, 2016: 347).

The position of feminism within the academy carries a two-fold risk. On the one hand, it is marginalised and denied academic status because it is deemed too emotive, personal and unworthy of a space. On the

other hand, by engaging in academia feminism becomes ‘subject mainly to academic standards, rather than women’s experiences’ (Firth and Robinson, 2016: 347). The task for feminists then, is to maintain the space that has been forged within academia by feminists whilst retaining the emancipatory goals of feminism. For Firth and Robinson, their aim was ‘to encourage academic feminists to move towards a revival of grassroots knowledge-production to provide a theoretical base for feminism and other radical theories’ (2016: 348). It is crucially important to recognise and address the ways in which context, and the intersection of social location influence women’s lives (Enns et al, 2004: 418) and be mindful of the systems of oppression and domination that may be reinforced in the classroom setting. This is not necessarily best achieved by creating and describing an ideal feminist teaching space but rather through a recognition of the various approaches, the contributions they have made, and their shortcomings. This would require a toleration of ambiguity, seeing the contradictions and an exploration of the borders and boundaries among and between approaches (Enns et al. 2004: 425).

**Transformative Education: Paulo Freire and bell hooks**

Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is useful for conceptualising a vision of transformative education that has liberatory potential. His ideas originated in his work with literacy education of the poor in Brazil [...] but they enjoy widespread popularity throughout the western world (Dirkx, 1998: 2). The transformative education proposed by Freire aims to raise a critical consciousness amongst learners and is geared towards freedom from oppression. Dirkx explains how this critical consciousness is a “process in which learners develop the ability to analyse, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives” (1998:3). As Freire himself claimed, it involves “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970: 36). Glass offers a clear explanation of the ways in which transformative educational practices would work:

Knowledge becomes founded on dialogue characterised by participatory, open communication focussed around critical inquiry and analysis, linked to intentional action seeking to reconstruct the situation (including the self) and to evaluated consequences. The dialogue that distinguishes critical knowledge and cultural action for freedom is not some kind of conversation, it is a social praxis. To be liberatory it must respect the everyday language, understanding, and way of life of the knowers, and it must seek to create situations in which they can more deeply express their own hopes and intentions (Glass, 2001: 19).

Whilst there have been critics of Freire, there is much of his work that can be built upon by feminists. Jackson picked up on two key problem areas. The first relates to Freire’s claim that “a humanising education is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world” (Freire and Frei Betto, 1985: 14). Jackson points out that:

There is a danger in universalising a shared ‘humanising education’, and there are many other paths through which we become conscious of our positions in the world and learn to ‘know’ who and what we are, and this is particularly true of gender. Women and men have very different experiences of ‘their presence in the world’, which for women, for instance, may well be located in the private, and for men in the public arena (Jackson, 1997: 464).



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3 She also addresses Freire's claim that a role of humanising education is to teach women and men to take  
4 into consideration not only their own needs, 'but also the needs and aspirations of others' (Freire and Frei  
5 Betto, 1985: 15). Despite this claim Jackson explains how he:

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7 ... gives no consideration of what this means or how women and men have learned different ways  
8 of prioritising their own needs and the needs of others. Far from allowing us to find our path to  
9 liberation, women have long been tied to a caring and nurturing role, where we are expected, and  
10 have learned to expect of ourselves, that we will always put others first. The journey along the  
11 path to liberation for men has often been at the expense of women (Jackson, 1997: 465).  
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14 Although Freire does appear to fail to fully acknowledge gender differences, there is much that feminists  
15 can take from his work. Indeed, there is plenty of overlap and Freire's visions sit well with feminist ideals  
16 of empowerment, reflexivity and working to effect change. Jackson herself notes that what she wants and  
17 "cannot have without feminist pedagogy, is a theory of education which, whilst recognising difference,  
18 centralises and politicises women's oppression, and which works to break down hierarchical structures"  
19 (Jackson, 1997: 466). This does not differ all that much from what Freire was attempting to do with the  
20 Brazilian workers in his literacy program. There is a need to re-politicise the academic study of VAW and  
21 Freire's work that offer a tool for doing this. Understanding violence not only at the individual level for  
22 survivors, but also how this fits into wider social contexts is vital for any meaningful change to occur. The  
23 aim of my teaching in the module is to offer a space where women can articulate and explore their own  
24 experiences of violence individually and develop a counter-truth to the knowledge that is presented to  
25 them but this then needs to expand further and those individual experiences need to be understood  
26 within the wider systems of oppression. Freire states:  
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30 Starting out with the educands' knowledge does not mean circling around this knowledge ad  
31 infinitum. Starting out means setting off down the road, getting going, shifting from one point to  
32 another, not sticking or staying (Freire, 1993: 69-70 cited in Zoltock, 2014: 308).  
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35 And so whilst the personal lived experiences of students are a crucial starting point, Freire's visions of a  
36 transformative education can take us beyond this. Teaching about VAW in a way that can facilitate  
37 liberation or empowerment for women who have experienced that violence is not about presenting a  
38 new authentic 'truth' but providing an alternative worldview to enable critical engagement. This  
39 epistemology incorporates and transcends lived experience; locating these experiences in their historical  
40 relations as we understand them as products of systems of ideology, difference and oppression (Zoltock,  
41 2014: 310).  
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44 There are dangers of applying Freire's work without acknowledging the explicitly political emancipatory  
45 aims of his work. Elizabeth Ellsworth noted how the increase in what has been termed 'critical pedagogy'  
46 resulted in repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination (1989: 298). The use of some of the  
47 key terms such as 'empowerment', 'student voice' and 'dialogue' can become abstract and meaningless  
48 when those who "invoke concepts of critical pedagogy consistently strip discussions of classroom  
49 practices of historical context and political position" (Ellsworth, 1989: 300). This then runs the risk of  
50 maintaining the very power structures and systems of oppression that one is claiming to address,  
51 particularly when there is a focus on experience and pedagogical practices which require students to share  
52 confessional narratives but not teachers can result in a form of coercion. This is particularly problematic  
53 if there is no attempt to recognise the gender, race and class dynamics within the classroom. For Ellsworth  
54 a failure to recognise these reproduce, by default the category of generic critical teacher who is not  
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actually generic but a “discursive category predicated on the current mythical norm” and differences to this become variations on or additions to this generic human (Ellsworth, 1989: 298). The ways in which differing identities and forms of oppression intersect in the lives of students need to be acknowledged and addressed, as well as the power dynamics between the teacher and student based upon gender, race and class if there is a genuine desire to engage in liberatory teaching practices. It is crucial we pay attention to how we teach as well as what we teach (Enns et al. 2004: 420).

The ‘engaged pedagogy’ that bell hooks writes about is informed by her reading of Freire and is central to both my teaching practice and proposed study. It is a useful starting point for any educator that believes their work “is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (hooks, 1994: 13). In her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks writes of the mind/body split and explains how within bourgeois education structures, for teachers “the self was presumably emptied out the moment the threshold was crossed, leaving in place only an objective mind – free of experiences and biases” (1994: 16). Within these traditional educational structures, she explains, is a fear that the condition of the self would interfere with the teaching process. This mind/body split and the forced separation of the self in much of the traditional research and teaching practice on VAW poses significant problems for those who have experienced violence. Whilst I make no claim whatsoever to the superiority of personal experience, as a woman who has experienced violence I feel that to leave this part of me ‘at the door’ when I teach would be a dishonest act: a denial to both myself and my students. The decision to bring myself into my work is not self-indulgent but an active choice to make myself vulnerable - something both Freire and hooks suggest we should be doing if we claim to be engaging in education that is transformative - in an attempt to create a space where students are able to explore their own lived experiences and develop their own understandings of violence and oppression. The aim is to work towards creating theory from the location of pain and struggle (hooks, 1994: 75). This is something which hooks describes as liberatory as it “not only enables us to remember and recover ourselves, it charges and challenges us to renew our commitment to an active, inclusive feminist struggle” (ibid.)

The personal experience of myself or my students, who are welcome to speak if they so choose, does not replace the ‘theory’ for in engaged pedagogy the two are deeply entwined. If education is to be truly transformative and emancipatory then there is a need to acknowledge what hooks calls ‘passion of experience’, something she describes as encompassing many feelings but particularly suffering. She goes on to explain that it is a way of knowing that is often experienced through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience (hooks, 1994: 91) and argues that the complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance (ibid.). To bring this into the classroom, when criminology students are so often used to being taught to distance themselves from emotion and the rawness of experience allows for deeper learning that enables them to bring themselves into the classroom, or the lecture theatre as a whole person. For students who have experienced violence, this does not mean that the lectures and seminars act as therapy sessions but it does allow a space that can facilitate empowerment and healing.

**Challenging Dominant Truths about VAW: From Michel Foucault to Adrian Howe:**

Foucault has come under criticism by feminists, most notably for his failure to recognise the role gender plays in the systems of power that he seeks to challenge (Howe, 2008). However, much of his

postructuralist discourse analysis is of use to feminists and whilst he himself failed to take his own advice when it came to considering gendered oppression his explanation of criticism is useful for feminist attempts to challenge VAW. For him:

Criticism consists in uncovering thought and trying to change it: showing that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted. To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy' (Foucault 1994: 456–7).

This criticism proposes a starting point for the deep critical engagement that is required for social change. The analysis of VAW requires a platform from which to proceed that acknowledges that the 'taken for granted' knowledge about VAW is not as self-explanatory as it seems. This challenge to dominant forms of knowledge, that are seemingly self-evident, is further enhanced by Gramsci's term hegemony, which Strinati argues is maintained through dominant groups in society. These dominant groups, including - but not exclusively - the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups (Strinati, 1995: 165). This spontaneous consent can in part be attributed the language structure in which explanations of VAW have been based and which are articulated in policy, in the media, in everyday language and in traditional academic approaches to crime and violence.

Gandal pointed out over 30 years ago Foucault's project – both in his politics and his histories – was not to lay out solutions, but rather to identify and characterise problems (Gandal, 1986: 123). Just like Freire, and Marx, who influenced much of Freire's work, Foucault's method was to grasp a situation, an experience, in its specificity and its history, in the particular conditions that produced it and maintained it, in order to change it (Gandal, 1986: 124). He believed that a progressive politics needed, not a vision of what should be, but a sense of what was intolerable and an historical analysis that could help determine possible strategies in political struggles (ibid.) Feminists using Foucault's work to explore VAW allows for a mode of knowledge production which uses postructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social process and institutions to understand existing power relations and identify areas and strategies for change (Weedon, 1987 in Gavey, 1989: 460).

This has been taken up by Adrian Howe, who has used Foucault in her own teaching practices and which she sets out in her book *Sex, Violence and Crime: Foucault and the Man Question*. Her book, based on her own experiences of teaching the module I now teach on (and on which I was a student) "tests the limits of the sayable and unsayable" in relation to violence against women (Howe, 2008: 16). The module that she initially developed seeks to engage in discussions about truth production of VAW that are not merely concerned with uncovering "the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted" but "the ensemble of rules to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true" (Foucault, 1980: 132). It explores how, "camouflaged as etiological research, so-called 'expert' explanations for men's violent acts invariably deteriorate into apologies that run the gauntlet from the abjectly sycophantic to the self-consciously defensive" (Howe, 2008: 2) and offers an alternative way of looking at VAW that both challenges dominant explanations and provides women who have experienced violence with a platform to articulate their own experiences in their own words. It is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work (Gandal, 1986: 130).

An in-depth examination of the various discourses surrounding VAW: the media, law and academia allows students to challenge the dominant knowledge about violence which seek explanations in the individual, present violence paradoxically as both the actions of a few deviant men and an inevitable result of man's natural sexual urges. Such explanations ultimately blame women for the actions of violent men by suggesting that they provoke it. By highlighting that criminology does nothing other than paraphrase and reiterate the dominant ideology (Cameron and Frazer, 1987), and questioning the modernist faith that science can reveal truth about human behaviour and will eventually bring about progress (Howe, 2008: 11) that criminology subscribes to, students are able to articulate their own experiences, and understandings of those experiences, on their own terms. I believe this is crucial for empowered participation in the continued struggle to end VAW.

For Howe, Foucault, despite his shortcomings, is important to the feminist task of challenging men's violence against women because he provides the tools and methodologies for those who wish to break out of criminological and other modernist paradigms through his insistence on problematising thought (2008: 12). She argues that his work enables us:

“...to engage critically and passionately with dominant discourses, criminology included, subjecting them to a critical interrogation he called problematisation, defined as an attempt to make problematic and throw into questions the practices, the rules, the institutions, the habits and the self-evidences that have piled up for decades and decades” (Howe, 2008: 12).

Howe's own approach to teaching is both radical and liberatory and a model upon which I base my own teaching. The content taught and the approach to teaching are significantly different to traditional models making the experience of learning one that is truly emancipatory. In *Sex, Violence and Crime*, Howe begins by asking “What happens when you sex violent crime, that is when you insist that violence is located within sexed, or as some prefer to call them, gendered relationships?” (2008: 1). The module that she taught here in the UK when I was an undergraduate student involved far more than learning theory. Whilst this was a crucial part of the learning experience, it was also an active challenge to oppression, VAW and the institutions that allow it to continue unchecked. Her summary of the rewards of the teaching experience for her, which warrant quotation in full, describe my own experiences as one of her students:

“Teaching in the field of sex, violence and crime has been an immensely rewarding experience. There have been moments of great poignancy and indomitable courage as students revisit violent episodes in their childhood or in their adult lives in order to reframe them in ways that ensure responsibility falls on the violators, and not themselves as victims. According to students' testimony, given year after year in seminars, essays and private correspondence, writing about undisclosed or unspoken violations of their own bodies and psyches can be part of a healing process. Most crucially, it can assist the transformation process from victim to survivor, then to states of identity that are no longer states of injury” (Howe, 2008: 8).

But, as she adds, what was most rewarding was “the constant scrutiny of our own discursive practices when it comes to naming and explaining sexed violence” (ibid.)

The journey of learning about sexed violence, or VAW, in this context begins with the creation of a space for student survivors and an acknowledgement of the violence and harm they have suffered. But it does not end there. The process is a dialogue between survivors, between survivors and those who have not experienced violence, between those who are ready to speak out and those who are unwilling or unable,

between men and women, between women of different heritage, with differing sexual identities, from different class backgrounds. This deep dialogue involves looking at ourselves and each other. It offers so much more than a grade or qualification; it is a powerful, sometimes painful, but truly liberating experience.

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